

Like a lot of people my age, Johnny Cash was someone who was always there, and in some crazy sense I thought he would always be there. The first Cash song I truly remember was "Ring of Fire" which was a big hit when I was a kid, but there were others which I didn't necessarily first hear by Cash: "I Still Miss Someone" and "Big River" were some of the others. I didn't appreciate him at first. I bought my first Johnny Cash album "Live At Folsom Prison," not long after it came out. At first I didn't see what all the fuss was about, but a couple of days later one of the songs (I can't remember which one) was stuck in my mind and I had to hear it again, and then again and again. I was hooked.

In 1969, PBS broadcast a documentary on Cash, "Johnny Cash: The Man and His Music." I was living in New York city at the time, and I remember a bunch of us crowding into someone's apartment to watch it mainly because word had gotten out that Bob Dylan was going to be on it. None of us had seen Bob Dylan since his motorcycle crash and when he finally appeared about midway through dueting in the recording studio with Cash on "One Too Many Mornings," it was something of a shock since Dylan was singing in a totally new voice, not to mention they were singing the song to the Johnny Cash beat and Dylan was chewing gum.

That documentary however was important for many other reasons. Living up to the title, it showed who Johnny Cash the man was. His Arkansas roots, singing in prison, his concern for American Indians, taking the time backstage to listen to some unknown songwriter. It showed that Cash was for more than some shallow country music hitmaker.

I finally got to see Johnny Cash in concert in 1976 at the Temple University Music Festival in the suburbs of Philadelphia. By this time I was heavy duty into country and western music and had seen many country performers. The Johnny Cash Show was totally different than any of the others. Back then country performers (with the exception of Merle Haggard) either didn't know or pay attention to the advances in live sound. The Cash show was professional in every way.

In the country tradition, it was a whole show with other acts, The Statler Brothers, the Carter Family. Cash's band, The Tennessee Three was augmented by piano player Earl Poole Ball as well as the Tennessee Trumpets (two trumpet players) who played on exactly two songs, "Ring of Fire" and another one, though I can't remember which one.

The greatness of The Tennessee Three is often overlooked, but their dynamics were amazing. This was no small venue, but Cash's Martin D-45 (he had two actually with capos in different positions so he never had to tune) which was neither plugged in or miked could easily be heard over the band. Cash's presence on stage was overwhelming. Even though you knew

he was going to do it, when he took the stage and said, "Hello I'm Johnny Cash," it was thrilling.

The show was carefully structured with various parts, a "Ride This Train" sequence, a gospel part near the end, and of course the duets with June Carter. One of the highlights was when he did his current hit, "One Piece At A Time" and a screen appeared and they had a (comical) movie of the car in the song, long before rock videos.

I didn't see Cash again until the late '80s or early '90s when he played the Keswick, a fairly small theater outside Philadelphia. The show had been scaled back somewhat. The Statler Brothers were gone and so was Les Ball. In a nod to tradition, Marshall Grant mostly played the upright bass. Again it was a totally amazing show.

The next time I saw Cash was at the Bob Dylan 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary tribute and then I saw him deliver the opening speech and sing some songs from his forthcoming first album on American at the South By Southwest Music Conference in Austin.

In 1995 I saw him again at the Keswick in a show that wasn't all that different than the previous one. His voice seemed deeper, richer and more powerful than ever. It was beyond magnetic and one of those shows you left feeling totally dazed.

Two years later it was announced he had Parkinson's disease and cancelled touring and an appearances to promote his new book. It turned out he didn't have Parkinson's disease and whatever sickness he really had wasn't diagnosed for years. More records appeared and by the time of his third album, "Solitary Man," it was obvious that his voice, a voice like no other was weakened.

When he appeared on the tribute to him at Radio City, there was no doubt he could still sing, but he looked like he was at death's door. Johnny Cash to me was something of an indestructible force, but it was difficult to watch him in this condition. It was just too sad.

But he persevered and continued to make music. And music is what Johnny Cash ultimately was about. Defying odds, he went way beyond the confines of country music and made songs you never dreamed he'd do his own.

In the past day a lot has been written and much has been said about what made Johnny Cash great. In the end I think it comes down to this: he was real. I don't think you can get any more real than Johnny Cash. And in a time that is marked by fear and peril, when our country appears to have lost

its direction and ideals, Johnny Cash stands as a shining example of a great American.

I think that's why his appeal spanned generations and affected people from every walk of life. I know this from singing his songs myself. Johnny Cash was always my ace in the hole for playing to a disinterested crowd. Someone would always know a Johnny Cash song. Play one and they'd want to hear more.

Waking up to the news Johnny Cash was gone was startling, but not surprising. It was time, but a numbness set in but at the same time I couldn't stop thinking about him and still can't stop thinking about him. Last night on TV, they showed a brief clip of him at June Carter's funeral. I barely recognized him. Even though I'd just seen him on a rerun of recent Larry King interview, he seemed to have aged another 50 years overnight. The love he and June Carter shared was like a beacon every time you saw them together. There was no doubt that here were two people who truly loved each other and were made for each other. Even from the relative distance of a stage it came through.

Yet, it's a measure of his greatness that Johnny Cash carried on till the end, still recording still making plans. This was a man who appreciated life in the face of genuine devastation.

Almost all of the great musicians who first recorded in that almost mystical tiny studio in Memphis are now gone. Interestingly enough, the biggest hell raiser of them all Jerry Lee Lewis survives. But for someone whose life (for some insane reason I'll never be able to explain) is based around music and what these people created, things are sad and only getting sadder.

In Johnny Cash's case however, we can rejoice and be grateful we lived in his lifetime and experienced the more than vast treasure of music he gave us. And grateful for all the other things he gave us as well. His music will live on for years to come. This has already been proven.

But as great as those songs are, no one can sing them the way he did. It was that unnamed "thing" in his voice. You can't put a name on it, but it expressed a thousand feelings all at once and perhaps said everything his lyrics left out.

So as the tributes pour in and accolades come from all over the world, there's one difference with Johnny Cash and that's that they are true. There have been few people in my lifetime that really lived up to the words legend and hero. Johnny Cash did, and lots of other things as well.